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12 Do's and Don'ts of Dollar Store Shopping

What to buy, what to avoid, and why many items sell for more than a buck

By Beth Braverman, AARP | 5 Comments
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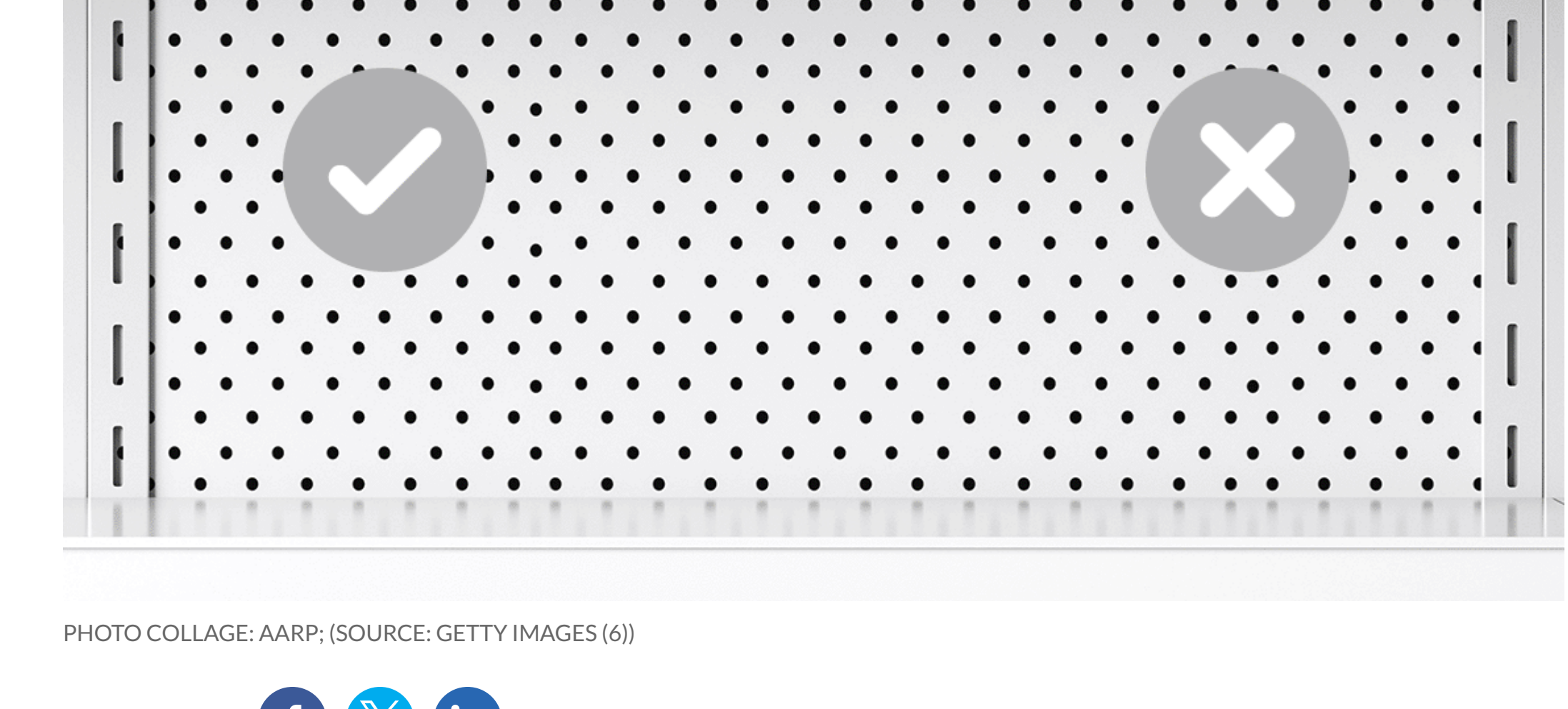


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Cost-conscious consumers know that shopping at dollar stores is a great way to stretch your budget.

Oftentimes that means making a visit to a dollar store, such as Dollar Tree, Dollar General or Family Dollar, to pick up some necessities. Consumers are shopping more frequently at these stores in response to inflation, according to CivicScience, an opinion research company. Nearly seven in 10 adults report that they or their family shop at these stores to some extent, up from about six in 10 in 2022.

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"If you haven't been [to a dollar store] in a while, it might be time to give it a shot. You might be surprised at the value there," says Brad Godwin, head of CPG partnerships at Breaktime Media.

Shopping experts say that visiting dollar stores and other such discounters can be a smart strategy, but some buys at dollar stores are better than others.

Keep these do's and don'ts in mind for your next dollar store shopping trip:

1. Do expect to find items that cost more than a dollar

Although dollar stores still have great deals, inflation has forced them to raise their prices along with most other retailers. In 2021, for example, Dollar Tree announced an increase in its base price to \$1.25, and this past March announced that it would introduce more products in the \$1.50 to \$7 price range.

2. Don't disregard the grocery department

Fruits and vegetables might not be the first products that come to mind when you're shopping at a dollar store, but their offerings may surprise you.

"Many dollar stores are starting to push into grocery ... and are now offering a limited but expanding fresh assortment, so shoppers can now get many of their staples at very competitive prices," Godwin says.

3. Do check expiration dates on perishable goods

Since dollar stores have lower product turnover than traditional grocery stores, it's possible that their goods will sit on the shelves for longer, Ramhold says. So before making a purchase, make sure you'll be able to consume the item before it goes bad.

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4. Don't purchase items that need to last

Dollar stores keep prices low by selling items that aren't built to last or for multiple uses. So it's a great place to stock up on items like seasonal decor, paper goods or office products. But you may want to avoid picking up tech items or fragile goods with multiple parts.

"It's really good to shop at dollar stores when quality doesn't matter but quantity does," says Kimberly Palmer, a spokesperson with personal finance website Nerdwallet.

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5. Do use coupons and cash back

All three of the large dollar stores accept both manufacturer's coupons and their own store coupons. You can get additional savings by using a rewards credit card or sending your receipt to a rewards app like Ibotta or Fetch.

The large dollar stores also have their own apps that highlight sales and provide additional coupons for users. Dollar General recently unveiled a program that allows its loyalty club members to earn cash back on purchases that goes directly to their loyalty member account or Ibotta, although you can't pair those offers with coupons.

6. Don't make unnecessary purchases

One of the dangers of shopping in dollar stores and other discount stores is the temptation to make nonessential purchases because the prices are so appealing. Keep in mind that adding items you don't need to your basket can cancel out the savings you could get on the things that you do need.

"The biggest mistake you can make at the dollar store is to purchase items that you don't need," Palmer says. "Then you end up with things that are expiring before you can use them, or you're just creating clutter in your house."

7. Do plan ahead if you're not a frequent dollar store shopper

If you don't have a dollar store nearby, or you don't make it a habit to visit one, make the most of your shopping trip there when you do make one.

"Think ahead to upcoming celebrations or holidays and try to stock up on items you need, so you don't have to worry about planning a future trip," says money consultant Andrea Woroch. "This could include picking up greeting cards for various birthdays and other celebrations you have coming up in the next few months and gift wrap as well for those occasions, if you're planning to give a gift."

8. Don't assume you're getting the best deal

While there are many unbeatable deals available at dollar stores, some items are cheaper elsewhere.

"It's just as important to compare prices at dollar stores with other big-box stores as you would shopping anywhere else," Woroch says. "Use an app like Flipp to compare store ads before you shop to see which local retailers have the best deals or new sales for items on your list."

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9. Do try out the store brands

While you'll find many recognizable brands at dollar stores, you'll also see plenty of less familiar branded goods under the store's private labels. Since these items are manufactured specifically for sale at the dollar stores, they're often priced even better.

"Like drug stores, these retailers have done a very good job of investing in their private labels," Godwin says. "Most people don't realize that the same factories that make the brand name items also might be making the private labels as well. The formula might just be slightly different with some of the ingredients tweaked, but you're going to see the same level product."

10. Don't be loyal to one store

Individual dollar stores often have different inventory. If you have more than one dollar store in your area, visiting multiple locations might yield savings unavailable in one store or the other.

"While multiple stores may have similar inventory, sometimes it's limited, but you can find everything you need at more than one store," Woroch says. "So, if you need three packs of themed paper plates and one store has only two, you might be able to pick up the other one across town."

11. Do shop online

Like other retailers, dollar stores, dollar stores have invested in their websites and online offerings, so you may be able to find dollar store deals without even visiting their brick-and-mortar locations. Shopping online can allow you to stretch your budget even further if you make the purchase through a cashback portal, like CouponCabin or RetailMeNot.

12. Don't shop late in the day

Dollar stores are facing labor shortages like all other types of businesses, and as they've become more popular, the lines for checkout can get long. Woroch suggests heading this off by visiting the store close to when they open in the morning, when lines tend to be shorter. Another benefit: Many stores restock their shelves after closing, so you'll get first dibs on any new items.

Beth Braverman is a contributing writer who has covered shopping and personal finance for more than a decade. Her work has appeared in Consumer Reports, CNNMoney.com, CNBC.com, and dozens of other outlets.

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